DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 400 567 CS 509 349

AUTHOR Shaw, Charla L. Markham
TITLE Performance Challenges Revisited: What Is Art?
PUB DATE Mar 96
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southern States Communication Association (Memphis, TN, March 27-31, 1996).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Aesthetic Education; Art Activities; *Art Expression; Audience Response; *Creative Expression; Definitions; *Drama; Dramatics; Higher Education; *Oral Interpretation
IDENTIFIERS *Aesthetic Communication; Art as Experience; Artistic Performance; *Performance Studies (Speech)

ABSTRACT

Teachers, researchers, and performers in the field of Performance Studies often find themselves defining what it is that they do. Boundaries are often hard to draw, however. Is the work they are doing "art?" The distinction is important to funding agencies, tenure committees, and university administration. One definition of art attributed to Allan Sekula is "a mode of communication, as a discourse anchored in concrete social relations, rather than a mystified, vaporous, and ahistorical realm of purely affective expression and experience." Another, from Henry Sayre, states that "art is the act of making, not the thing made," indicating that power or authority rests with the artist rather than the object itself. Elizabeth Fine believes that once a performance is abstracted from its native setting and presented to outsiders, the message can no longer be expected to fit automatically the audience's capacity to decode it. Richard Bauman addresses differential identity in relation to folklore, labeling it "artistic verbal communication," with the focus on communicative interaction. According to Stephen Tyler, the meaning is not the exclusive right of the text or the author/artist, but, instead, the interaction of text-author-reader. Perhaps there is a middle or new ground of understanding that lies not with self and not with the other, but in an intersection between the two. (Contains 10 references.) (CR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 400 567

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
C Shaw
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Performance Challenges Revisited:

What is Art?

Charla L. Markham Shaw

PhD. Louisiana State University. 1993

University of Texas at Arlington

Department of Communication. Box 19107

Arlington. TX 76019-0107

(817) 273-2163/273-2678

CS509349

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Performance Challenges Revisited:

What is Art?

As researchers, teachers, and performers in the field of Performance Studies, we sometimes find ourselves defining what it is that we do. It becomes clear, however, that boundaries are often difficult to draw. Is the work you are doing art? This distinction may not be an important one to you, but it could be to funding agencies, tenure committees, and university administration. In looking for an answer to this question, I became aware of how many times the word art is placed in the position of "art". Is this quotation marking of art a result of its sacred status or the multiplicity of its definitions? Does the word art need to be defined? In the following pages an attempt will be made to address these questions in one form or another. What may result, however, is the dissemination of an annoying and incessant echo.

In Criticizing Photographs: An Introduction to Understanding Images, Barrett (1990) explains that "aesthetic theory most prominently attempts to define what art is" (p. 121). Barrett goes on to offer a definition of art from Allan Sekula: "a mode of human communication, as a discourse anchored in concrete social relations, rather than as a mystified, vaporous, and ahistorical realm of purely affective expression and experience" (p. 121). Sounds uplifting, democratizing, but incredibly broad. Using

Sekula's definition, the next question would seemingly be "What isn't art?". To further quell my hopes in answering the question, "What is art?", Barrett kindly leaves this discussion by stating that some definitions of art "take the length of a book to fully explicate" (p. 122).

Sayre (1989) offers a variety of answers to the question, "What is art?" in his book, The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde Since 1970. In relation to Ginsberg's "breath-event," Sayre explains that "Art is the act of making, not the thing made" (p. 183). According to this definition of art, power or authority rests with the artist rather than the object itself. In the case of oral poetry, which is the focus of the Sayre discussion, the text is "demystified and desanctified" and the spoken word is "reconstituted with mystery and awe" (p. 183). This definition of art seems to be modernist and contradictory in some sense to that offered previously by Sekula, as Sekula deems art "anchored in concrete social relations" rather than mystified. Both, however, emphasize the primary position in art as a human one.

According to Danto (1981), some of the best philosophers of philosophy and art have argued that a definition of art cannot be given, that "it is a mistake to attempt to give it, not because there is not a boundary but because the boundary cannot be drawn in the ordinary ways" (p. 57). The definition of art, however, has become "part of the nature of art in a very explicit way" (Danto, p. 56).

Danto argues that, indeed, there is not a neat "formula" which will lead us to "pick out artworks in the way we can pick the bagels out in the bakeshop: for if `bagel' had the logic of `artwork,' a pumpkin pie could be a bagel" (p.61). The Transfiguration of the Commonplace (1981) is Danto's argument for a philosophical definition of art which is not tied to properties such as boundaries.

Victor Turner defines art as "redressive machinery" that is "put into operation in order to `patch up quarrels, mend broken social ties, seal up punctures in the social fabric'" (as cited in Sayre, 1989, p. 185). Sayre goes on to explain that Turner sees art as transformative in nature: an activity that "seeks to move forward the society that has generated the breach" (p. 186). In his essay, "Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama: An Essay in the Anthropology of Experience," Turner (1986) cites John Dewey's definition of art as one he partly shares. "Dewey (1934) held that works of art, including theatrical works, are `celebrations, recognized as such, of ordinary experience'" (Turner, p. 34). Turner explains that Dewey rejected the capitalist definition of art as separated from human life, and deemed valuable only if judged commercially so by "esoteric experts." In Art As Experience, Dewey (1958) states, "Even a crude experience, if authentically an experience, is more fit to give a clue to the intrinsic nature of aesthetic experience than is an object already set apart from any

other mode of experience" (p. 11). Here, then, art is connected to human experience as it is in the definitions given above by Sekula and Ginsberg. And, as is the case in Danto's discussion, no recognizable boundaries (or perhaps traditional/Structuralist criteria) are identified.

Barbara Babcock (1986) echoes both Dewey and Turner in her essay, "Modeled Selves: Helen Cordero's `Little People'". Babcock agrees with Dewey that art objects should not be separated from human experience. In addition, like Turner, she sees art as transformative: "objects are used not only to represent experience but also to apprehend it and to interpret it, to give it meaningful shape'" (p. 318). Babcock notes that "`techne'" (art or craft) originally denoted a mode of knowing" (p. 319). This mode of knowing shapes personal, as well as cultural experience. Babcock explores Pueblo pottery "as an art shaped from experience as well as earth . . . as something people have used to give meaning and structure to their lives as well as to carry water or to make money" (p. 320). Art, then, is tied to human experience, shaped by human experience, and shapes human experience. Babcock's essay has made me aware of the very ethnocentric (Western/Capitalist) view of art that I have held. According to Babcock, art can be used in everyday practices: it does not have to stand high above the mundane to be art.

The above mentioned definitions generally share the notion that there are no specific structural boundaries and,

perhaps more importantly, human experience is at the center of the word "art." Is human experience, however, universal? If not, then where does the "touchstone" of universality fit in? Universality stands as one of the three marks of "great art/literature": individuality, universality, and suggestion. Is that approach outdated with the contemporary awareness of Western ethnocentricity?

Geertz (1976) argues for the cultural specificity of art. Designating art objects "is always a local matter; what art is in classical China or classical Islam, . . . is just not the same thing, no matter how universal the intrinsic qualities" (pp. 1476-1477). Geertz explains that art is a part of the larger culture, and that art is only possible through participation "in the general system of symbolic forms we call culture" (p. 1488).

As human experience potentially differs and art is culturally specific, how can it be recognized? And if identified as art, how do we understand the art of the other? Can we?

Elizabeth Fine (1984) presents information theory and its premise that once a performance is abstracted from its native setting and presented to outsiders, "the message can no longer be expected to fit automatically the audience's capacity to decode it" (p. 105). Nida (as cited in Fine) goes on to suggest that the audience must adjust to the culturally unfamiliar message or the performance must be adjusted to the audience. Fine explains that it would be

possible to insist that the audience invest the necessary time and effort to decode a non-native text, but Nida argues that "`a really satisfactory translation should not impose that sort of burden on the receptor'" (as cited in Fine, p. 106).

Can "art" be separated and translated apart from its native context? Browning and Hopper argue that "rather than treating context as static and separable from messages, . . . context should be treated as `becomings' or `interactive systems'" (as cited in Fine, 1984, p. 67). Hence, in response to Nida, the goal should not be to adapt self to other but to treat this interaction as a new creation. This new creation, however, is perceived as "cultural genocide" by some. According to Snyder, ethnopoetics presently stands to protect societies by promoting cultural specificity and identity.

Richard Bauman (1972) addresses the issue of differential identity in relation to folklore. Not only does he include different tribal and linguistic groups in his analysis, but ethnic, religious, regional, occupational, demographic, and kinship affiliation differences as well. A reorientation is proposed which posits that "members of particular groups or social categories may exchange folklore with each other, on the basis of shared identity, or with others, on the basis of differential identity" (p.38). Early in his essay Bauman explains the sense of shared lore: "The lore is shared in the sense that it constitutes a

communicative bond between participants, but the participants themselves are different. the forms they employ are different, and their view of the folklore passing between them is different" (p. 37). In applying this idea of exchange, Bauman labels it "artistic verbal communication." As with communication theory, the focus is the communicative interaction. For artistic communication to occur, some "shared understanding on the part of sender and receiver of the esthetic conventions of the expressive system being employed" is required (p. 40). Although this view would seem to be arguing against an ethnopoetic ideal of cultural differentiation, it seems to stop just short. Bauman's position seems to lie somewhere between the two poles of "let us find the universal `we'" and "cultural identity and integrity must be maintained." (Perhaps, however, this is a projection of my own liminality concerning this topic onto Bauman! For it seems that there is a middle ground that can be occupied. Not in the sense of "riding the fence," but in viewing and moving toward understanding of other while preserving cultural diversity. A postmodernist would most likely label me romantic!)

So, to the postmodernists. According to Tyler (1986), meaning is not the exclusive right of the text or the author/artist but, instead, the interaction of text-author-reader: it is emergent "through the reflexivity of text-author-reader and privileges no member of this trinity as the exclusive locus or means of the whole" (p. 133). In

addition, no transference of meaning/understanding is provided for in the postmodern ethnography. For example, in response to the question of translation, Tyler portrays it

> as fording a stream that separates one text from another and changing languages in midstream. This is mimesis of language, one language copying another, which never makes a copy anyway, but a more or less contorted original . . . . it is still a silly idea to suppose that one might render the meanings of another folk in terms already known to us just as if the others had never been there at all. For it is not for us to know the meaning for them unless it is already known to us both, and thus needs no translation, but only a kind of reminding (pp. 137-138).

I would agree with the above to a certain degree. We may never be able to truly reproduce the original or completely understand the other, but that does not rule out understanding in and of itself. Perhaps there is a middle or new ground of understanding that lies not with self and not with other but in an intersection between the two. This intersection may take the form of a "reminding," but may also take the form of a new discovery--a new "art." Romantic? Probably.

Works Cited

Babcock, Barbara. "Modeled Selves: Helen Cordero's 'Little People'." The Anthropology of Experience. Eds. Victor Turner and Edward Bruner. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1986. 316-343.

Barrett, Terry. Criticizing Photographs: An Introduction to Understanding Images. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 1990.

Bauman, Richard. "Differential Identity and the Social Base of Folklore." Toward New Perspectives in Folklore. Eds. Americo Paredes and Richard Bauman. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1972. 31-41.

Danto, Arthur. The Transfiguration of the Commonplace. Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. P., 1981.

Dewey, John. Art As Experience. New York: Capricorn Books, 1958.

Geertz, Clifford. "Art as a Cultural System." Modern Language Notes 91 (1976): 1473-99.

Rothenberg, Jerome. Technicians of the Sacred. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985.

Sayre, Henry. The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Turner, Victor. "Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama: An Essay in the Anthropology of Experience." The Anthropology of Experience. Eds. Victor Turner and Edward Bruner. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1986. 33-44.

Tyler, Stephen. "Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document." Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography. Eds. James Clifford and George Marcus. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986. 122-140.